

## **Decision Memo**

### **Parking Area Expansion, Wildlife Openings, and Mountain Longleaf Pine Planting Dry Creek Timber Sale Project Area**

USDA Forest Service  
Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District  
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests  
Walker County, Georgia

## **BACKGROUND**

The Dry Creek Timber Sale, located in Walker County, Georgia, is expected to be completed by the spring of 2007. There are several projects that can be implemented using Knudsen-Vandenberg funds within the Dry Creek Sale area. This Decision Memo approves the implementation of these projects within the general sale area boundary.

## **DECISION**

I have decided to implement the following projects:

- Expansion of a parking area for Pinhoti Trail users through the use of an existing log landing site,
- Creation of wildlife openings through the use of a log landing and a temporary haul road, and
- Site preparation (prescribed fire) and then planting mountain longleaf pine seedlings on an estimated 30 acres.

### **Parking Lot Expansion**

The Pinhoti Trail is a popular long distance trail which extends from Alabama across Georgia, eventually linking to the Appalachian Trail. This particular site is where the Pinhoti Trail crosses the Ridge and Valley Scenic Byway. The Ridge and Valley Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan (February 2003) recommends this area as a "Point of Interest".

There is currently a small parking area on the site which accommodates 2 vehicles. Vehicles are forced to back onto the Ridge and Valley Scenic Byway, causing a safety hazard.

The parking lot will be expanded using a log landing site created during the harvesting of the Dry Creek Timber Sale (see attached map). The area will be graded, gravel will be placed on the surface, and barriers will be constructed around the parking area. A trailhead sign will be installed.

The parking area will be designed as a triangular wedge and will use the existing tree line near the highway in order to minimize the visual impacts. This area will have a single entry driveway with adequate sight distances to mitigate the existing safety hazard of cars backing onto the highway.

The expanded area will be able to accommodate 6 vehicles and can be used by hikers and mountain bikers using the Pinhoti Trail or hard surface bikers using the Scenic Byway.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment because it falls under the intent of FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, 31.12, Category 5, "Repair and maintenance of recreation sites and facilities".

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment. There were no pertinent questions about the parking lot expansion that were brought up during scoping.

### **Creation of Wildlife Openings**

Permanent wildlife openings are used by a variety of wildlife, both game and non-game. Openings containing grass-clover mixtures are an important source of nutritious forage in winter and early spring, especially in years when acorns are in short supply. A one-acre opening provides forage equivalent to that in 100 to 1,000 acres of mature forest. Openings also provide important habitat for young turkeys, grouse, many songbirds, and small mammals from the abundance of seeds and insects produced and the grassy nesting material provided.

Two wildlife openings will be created in Compartment 918, Stand 40, to improve wildlife habitat (see attached map) in the Dry Creek Timber Sale area. One wildlife opening will be created from a log landing and a linear wildlife opening will be created from the temporary road which was constructed to allow access to this stand. These areas will be seeded, fertilized and mulched.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment because it falls under the intent of FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, 31.2, Category 6, "...wildlife improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low stand road constructions..."

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment. There were some concerns identified during scoping that were related to the introduction of non-native invasive species and encouraging illegal ATV use.

I have considered these comments. As with all temporary roads, the area will be blocked to discourage illegal ATV use. There is ample opportunity for legal ATV use in the area with the close proximity to Houston Valley ORV Area so the Dry Creek area experiences little known illegal use. Considering this, I have determined that the risk of encouraging illegal ATV use with the development of these permanent wildlife openings is low.

Any ground disturbing activities carries a risk of establishment of non-native invasive species. However, there are currently no known populations of non-native invasive species in this part of Compartment 918 so I have determined that the risk is low. If populations become established, appropriate measures will be taken at that time.

### **Mountain Longleaf Pine Planting**

Mountain longleaf pine forests are a native plant community in the ridge and valley area that were greatly reduced in the early 1900s. During this time, areas were cleared for agricultural uses or harvested for timber products. Eventually, many of these areas were then planted with loblolly pine. Historically, mountain longleaf pine forests were found on dry ridge tops ranging down to mid-slopes with a southern or western aspect. Mountain longleaf pine stands are considered to be fire-dependent ecosystems.

In Compartment 918, Stand 44, the loblolly pine and other pines have been damaged by southern pine beetle and subsequent wind events. The soils in the stand are similar to the soils on nearby Strawberry Mountain where established mountain longleaf pine stands are growing well. In addition, adjacent to the area is a 4-acre stand of mountain longleaf pine, which is coming out of the grass stage.

An estimated 30 acres of mountain longleaf pine will be planted after the site is burned. Burning will occur on a 3-5 year basis to ensure the establishment of the mountain longleaf pine. The goal is to achieve at least a 70% mountain longleaf pine component with a grass and forb understory. The remaining stand would be made up of oak and hickory.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment because it falls under the intent of FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, 31.2, Category 5, "...regeneration of an area to native trees species, including site preparation which does not involve the use of herbicides or result on vegetation type conversion..."

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment. There were some concerns identified during scoping that were related to whether or not the site is ecologically appropriate to mountain longleaf pine restoration and whether they would be resistant to southern pine beetle attack.

I have considered these comments. This site is very similar to areas that have thriving communities of mountain longleaf pine, including similar soil types. Nearby stands have mountain longleaf pine in the grass stage and up to 20 feet in height.

Mountain longleaf pine is very tolerant of fire during the grass stage, which fits within the Forest Plan goal to establish and maintain a fire dependent ecosystem. After they come out of the grass stage, burning would not occur until they get old enough to again be tolerant of fire. Additionally, mountain longleaf pine is thought to be fairly resistant to southern pine beetle attacks.

Considering this, I have determined that mountain longleaf pine restoration is appropriate at this site.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

Public involvement was initiated by sending letters and emails to the district list of interested parties. Additionally, a Request for Comments was posted in the *Dalton Daily Citizen* on July 14, 2006. Three responses were received. Scoping both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to cause extraordinary circumstances.

## **FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY**

These projects are designated as Management Prescription 9H- Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plant Associations to their Ecological Potential under the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). I have reviewed the direction provided under this management prescription and have determined that these projects are consistent with the direction found for this Management Prescription (Forest Plan, pages 3-167 through 3-170).

I have reviewed the scenic integrity objectives for the area. Mitigations for visual impacts will be implemented in order to meet the scenic integrity objectives. These mitigations are outlined in detail in the project file.

These actions are designed to comply with all management requirements in the Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Appalachian Mountains, which is an amendment to the Forest Plan.

In addition, the projects help meet the following Forest Plan goals and objectives:

### **Parking Lot Expansion**

- Goal 29: “Protect and enhance the scenic/aesthetic values and the Landscape Character of the National Forest lands in the Southern Appalachians, the Ridge and Valley and the Piedmont by meeting all adopted Scenic Integrity Objectives on Forest Service lands within individual management prescriptions.” (Forest Plan, page 2-28)
- Objective 29.4: “Within ten years of Plan implementation, improve amenities and views within high use areas, vista points, and along interpretive trails.” (Forest Plan, page 2-28)

### **Wildlife Openings**

- Goal 2: “A diversity of habitat will be provided for the full range of native and other desired species. Sufficient amounts of interior or late-successional habitat will be provided to meet needs of all successional communities. Early successional habitat will

be well distributed in all forest types, elevations, aspects, and slopes including riparian corridors.” (Forest Plan, page 2-4)

### **Mountain Longleaf Pine Planting (with Prescribed Fire)**

- Goal 3: “Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types.” (Forest Plan, page 2-6)
- Objective 3.5: “Within the first 10 years of Plan implementation restore 1,100 acres of mountain longleaf pine and longleaf pine-oak forests within the Southern Ridge and Valley ecological section on sites where they once likely occurred.” (Forest Plan, page 2-6)

### **REVIEW OF EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES**

I have considered the resources found in the project area and have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist. I have considered:

#### **1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.**

The Biological Evaluation indicates that there are no known threatened or endangered species in the vicinity of the project area(s).

Forest Service Manual 2670 direction requires analysis of potential impacts to sensitive species, those species for which the Regional Forester has identified population viability is a concern. Potential effects of this decision on Regional Forester sensitive species have been analyzed and documented in a Biological Evaluation. This decision will have “no impact” on sensitive species population viability.

#### **2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds**

These projects will not result in the occupancy or modification of a floodplain. This decision will not affect floodplains. This decision will not affect wetlands. There are no source water/municipal watersheds in this project area. This decision will not affect municipal watersheds.

#### **3. Congressionally Designated Areas**

There is no designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, National Recreation Areas, or Wild and Scenic Rivers within the decision area. There are no inventoried Roadless areas (RARE II

or Forest Plan) in the decision area (Forest Plan FEIS and ROD 2004). This decision will not affect inventoried Roadless areas. There are no Research Natural Areas in the decision area. This decision, with impacts limited to the immediate area of activity, will not affect Research Natural Areas.

#### **4. Native American Religious or Cultural Sites, Archaeological sites, or Historic Properties or Areas**

Surveys were conducted for Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, and historic properties or areas that may be affected by this decision (Planning Record). A 'no properties affected' determination was made. Overall, a thorough review was conducted on the project area and no potential significant impacts were identified.

### **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS**

This decision complies with all applicable laws and regulations. For example, I have considered the following:

#### **1. Clean Water Act**

This Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through the use of Best Management Practices and Forest Plan standards. This decision incorporates Best Management Practices and Forest Plan standards to ensure protection of soil and water resources. The Forest Plan standards will be implemented to protect water quality and soils. Site-specific evaluation of soil conditions indicate that no soil conditions exist that require special mitigations. In the event that any unusual conditions are found during project implementation, activities will be modified to protect soils for compaction or erosion. All project activities should take place when soil moisture is conducive to equipment.

#### **2. Clean Air Act**

Under this Act areas of the country were designated as Class I, II, or III airsheds for Prevention of Significant Deterioration purposes. Class I areas generally include national parks and wilderness areas. The area covered by this decision is a Class II airshed. A greater amount of additional human-caused air pollution may be added to these areas. Georgia Department of Environmental quality regulates prescribed burning in the state in accordance with the State Implementation Plan (SIP). The State has been involved in the planning process. The Prescribed burning authorized in this decision will be accomplished in coordination with the State and follow the SIP to protect air resources, including obtaining and following air quality permits, if needed.

#### **3. Federal Cave Resources Protection Act**

This Act is to secure, protect, preserve, and maintain significant caves, to the extent practical. No known cave resources will be affected by this decision.

#### **4. Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)**

This Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this Act. Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

#### **5. National Forest Management Act**

This project complies with the seven requirements of the National Forest Management Act related to vegetation management (36 CFR 219.27(b)).

1. It is best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area based on Forest-wide direction. This suitability is based on the potential environmental, biological, cultural resource, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts.
2. The areas will remain adequately stocked after treatment.
3. This action has not been chosen primarily due to cost considerations, although this was taken into consideration.
4. This action has been chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.
5. The action will avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.
6. The action will provide the desired effects on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, woody regeneration, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and resource needs.
7. The project area has adequate roads and no new permanent roads are necessary to implement this decision. This proposal is practical in terms of transportation requirements, and the total costs of preparation and administration. This project does not require a project-level roads analysis because there are no permanent changes in access into the area and road standards will not change.

#### **APPEAL RIGHTS**

This decision is subject to appeal, pursuant to the USFS regulations 36 CFR 215.11 by those who provided comments or otherwise expressed interest in this particular proposal during the 30-day public comment period. Written Notice of Appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, "Content of Notice of Appeal", including the reasons for appeal. Appeals must be postmarked or received in duplicate within 45 days after the legal notice publication date in

the *Daily Citizen*. The appeal should be sent to: Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 1755 Cleveland Highway, Gainesville, Georgia, 30501.

## **IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

For further information about this project contact Matt Hughes, Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District, 3941 Hwy 76, Chatsworth, Georgia, 30705, or by telephone at (706)-695-6736, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. & 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

## **RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL SIGNATURE AND DATE**

/s/ Michele Jones  
MICHELE H. JONES  
District Ranger

January 23, 2007  
DATE

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